

Nineteen Projects Awarded Funding Under Pacific Region's 'Connecting People With Nature' Small Projects Fund

By Sean Connolly

Can \$25,000 change the world?

It might when parlayed into school gardens created to be living laboratories that teach Chinese terrace gardening and global climate change impacts, helps purchase digital cameras for inner-city Portland youth to photograph and learn about migratory birds, and literally transports Hawai'an students, teachers, and families to Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge to reconnect with their culture and conserve imperiled avifauna.

These are three of 19 projects awarded \$18,000 in funding in 2009 from the Pacific Region's 'Connecting People with Nature' Small Projects Fund. Five additional projects were recently added, thanks to \$7,500 in end-of-year Fisheries Program funding, bringing the total number of 2009 projects to 24.

Now in its second year, the Small Project Fund's size and scope has quintupled based on a pilot program begun last year in which \$2,500 was set aside. That year, six out of 20 projects requesting \$21,000 were ultimately selected, including the Region's first officially sponsored Schoolyard Habitat project at Whitson Elementary School in Stevenson, Washington.

The high demand in 2008 prompted the Region's Connecting People with Nature Team to recommend the Fund's expansion in 2009, and in March the Regional Directorate approved the recommendation.

"This money is there to fuel the growing enthusiasm and commitment on the part of our Pacific Region employees in getting outside" and helping others get outside, said Taylor Pittman, a member of last year's Small Projects Fund Ranking Committee and current Region 1 Connecting People with Nature Team Co-Lead. "We have such a tremendous resource in our people."

This year's proposal response far outmatched last year's: 45 projects requesting nearly \$112,000 were submitted in four weeks – seven times the amount of funding available. Service employees in all four states and in the Pacific Islands submitted proposals, representing every single Service program area in both the field and Regional Office.

New 2009 projects include "Operation Redtail," where Service Law Enforcement agents helped transport middle school students to their first-ever visit Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge to view songbirds and raptors; funding the purchase of fishing tackle, exhibit items and scientific equipment that will help expand Free Fishing Day and outdoor education events at Hagerman National Fish Hatchery in Idaho; and working

with teachers and parents of Douglas County, Oregon, pre-schoolers become ‘Super Scientists through their local YMCA.

Several successful projects funded in 2008 received resources again in 2009, such as completing the Region’s first officially-sponsored Schoolyard Habitat at Whitson Elementary School in White Salmon, Washington, and the Columbia River Fisheries Program Office’s partnership with Julia Butler Hansen National Wildlife Refuge and Heritage High School in Vancouver, Washington.

Heritage High School students are developing an indoor freshwater ecosystem, and with Service transportation and equipment funding will, for the second year in a row, use the Refuge as a living laboratory to conduct water chemistry tests, macro-invertebrate comparative studies, and develop nature photography skills.

New and continuing funded projects ranged from \$500 to \$1,000 for activities that would reach a minimum of 30 and, in some cases, hundreds of children and adults. Half the projects occur on Service lands using environmental education facilities such as McNary National Wildlife Refuge’s Discovery Room. The others support Service-sponsored activities off-station, such as Oregon’s Wallowa County Watershed Festival.

Virtually all provide people of all ages the opportunity to get outside while helping the Service tackle some of today’s toughest conservation issues, such as global climate change, recovery of threatened or endangered species, pollinator and songbird declines, and combating childhood obesity.

The high response and diversity of submitted project proposals pleases Regional Director Robyn Thorson, who announced the 2009 Small Projects Fund in April. Thorson expects all Service stations and staff in the Pacific Region to participate in implement Connecting People with Nature, using partner-oriented, entrepreneurial approaches with the people, facilities, program and funding resources at hand.

“Connecting People with Nature is a priority for everyone in the Service, no matter where we work or what we do,” Thorson said. “These efforts benefit the mission of the entire Service: The cross-program nature of connecting people with nature inspires us to leverage our many Service resources – human and land – and work among ourselves and with partners to bring maximum benefit to kids, families and ultimately, to the fish and wildlife resources we’re entrusted with.”